

Part 8 of this series on *The Church* is entitled, Our Ministry. I'm not talking about my ministry or your ministry in particular, whatever that might be, but the corporate, united, joint-effort ministry of every church. "Our Ministry" is what all followers of Jesus Christ are called to do, because of the kind of people we have been called to be – God's children.

Before proceeding, we need to understand the meaning of "ministry," which comes from the Greek word, *diakonia*, out of which comes the English word, *deacon*. Literally, *diakonia* or *deacon* refers to someone who serves another. Thus, "Our Ministry" is all about our service to others. What does that look like? What should it look like? To answer such questions, we need the right example, and for those who identify themselves as Christians, the right example is found only in the person of Christ. In fact, the word, Christian, means "little Christ." The Father in heaven has called His adopted children to follow the example of His only begotten Son, Jesus Christ. Let us not, then, be thinking about my ministry or your ministry, but our ministry, which is His ministry.

So, in a nutshell, what is the ministry of Jesus? Several years ago, while reading my favorite book in the Bible, which I have studied more than any other, even to the extent of memorizing the entire text, a particular verse captivated my attention like never before. The verse is from John 8:29, where Jesus says this of His Father: "I always do the things that are pleasing to Him." I paused to read and recite those words over and over again, reflecting on them, and pondering the implications of that simple, but profoundly important statement. Immediately, I was impressed to ask two questions: (1) Why did Jesus always do the things that pleased His Father? (2) Why should I do likewise? The answers begin with an understanding of the Father/Child relationship.

First, we must consider John 8:29 in its context, because any verse of the Bible, just like any word uttered by anyone, is rightly understood only in context. In John 8:21, Jesus repeats something said in verse 14, where He spoke about where He came from, and where He is going. Some of the religious leaders in the audience, previously noted as Pharisees, become confused when Jesus says, "I go away, and you will seek Me, and will die in your sin; where I am going, you cannot come." He is referring here to His death, resurrection and subsequent ascension into heaven. However, his opponents wrongly interpret Jesus to mean suicide, for they say, "Surely, He will not kill Himself, will He?" Their confusion mounts when Jesus reveals the spiritual difference between Himself and His adversaries by saying that they are from below, in reference to this world, while He is from above, in reference to heaven. Jesus is going to the Father, but these Pharisees, who have opposed Him and His message, cannot follow, because they do not believe in Him. Consequently, they will die in their sins. Jesus addresses their lack of faith in a startling way, by saying, "You do not believe that I am *He*." In the Greek text, the words Jesus uses are *ego eimi*, translated, "I, I am." He intentionally uses the sacred name of God, "I am," to reveal His divine nature. As God, Jesus has authority to forgive sins. Therefore, without faith in Him, there is no hope of life after death.

The Pharisees knew about the human nature of Jesus, that he was the son of Mary and Joseph from Nazareth, but the things He says about His divine nature

are strange to their ears. Finally, they ask, "Who are you?" Jesus, who has been answering this question since beginning His public ministry, responds in verse 25 with a question, no doubt asked with exasperation: "What have I been saying to you from the beginning?" In the next few verses Jesus makes it clear that He is not acting on His own or in His own interests, but entirely on behalf of His Father. The last half of verse 28 and all of verse 29 go like this: "I do nothing on My own initiative, but I speak these things as the Father taught Me. And He who sent me is with Me; He has not left me alone for I always do the things that are pleasing to Him." It is now plain to see that the reason why Jesus always pleases the Father is because He is always with the Father and the Father is always with Him. Their relationship is so intimate that they both think the same, speak the same and behave the same. Yet, because God the Son has willingly subordinated Himself to God the Father in order to redeem humanity from sin, the Son pleases the Father, not only in service to Him, but also in service to us. This attitude of love expresses itself in acts of love, not for the sake of self, but selflessly for the sake of others. In short, the Son pleases the Father out of love for the Father. So, if we truly love the Father, we will want to please Him as well. If this sounds simple, that's because it is simple. The difficulty comes not with understanding this concept, but practicing it. For instance, consider this....

We live in a broken world of broken relationships, and all of us have been adversely affected to some degree. For example, those who have not received the love of an earthly father find it difficult to both understand and experience the love of a heavenly Father. My wife was one such person. When Dawn was very young, her biological father abandoned his wife and four children. Years later, her mother remarried a man who eventually adopted Dawn and her sister, but not her brothers. Although Dawn experienced the protection and provision of someone she called, dad, he was not caring or kind in other ways. Soon after starting high school, Dawn's mother divorced her current husband, suddenly married a neighbor, and moved from the Midwest to the Northwest. Less than a year later, her mother divorced again and married again. Although I knew Dawn during dad #2, #3 and #4, I had no idea how deeply her self-esteem and sense of worth had been damaged. I didn't begin to understand until years later, when she came to visit me in Guam during my first assignment in the Coast Guard. By then, we had grown close through letters exchanged overseas. During her stay, I invited Dawn to an event where she heard a speaker talk about God as a Father, who loved her unconditionally and selflessly to the point of giving His life for her in the person of His only Son, Jesus. That message pierced Dawn's heart, and I distinctly remember her hand going up as I sat next to her. She wanted what was offered, the love of a Father, who demonstrated His compassion and care in a most incredible way. That was a life-changing moment for her, and for me, too, because I had taken for granted my upbringing, which was considerably different.

I'm reminded by the account in Luke 7:36-50, where a sinful woman interrupts a banquet where Jesus is dining in the home of a Pharisee named Simon. In a humble, meek manner, the woman lavishes love on Jesus, which Simon finds inappropriate, to say the least. Jesus responds to Simon's indignation by telling a parable about a moneylender with two debtors, one owing a lot, and one owing

a little. When they were unable to repay, the moneylender forgave them both. Jesus then asks Simon which debtor would love the lender more, to which he answers, "I suppose the one whom he forgave more." Jesus then compares the consideration he received from Simon as his dinner guest with that of the sinful woman. There is no comparison. Jesus then tells Simon, "her sins, which are many, have been forgiven," and affirms her tremendous expression of gratitude. The Lord leaves Simon with this insight: "He who is forgiven little, loves little."

Biblical stories like this one of Jesus forgiving a sinful woman, and personal stories like the one of Dawn experiencing God as a loving Father, answer the question about why we should always do the things that are pleasing to Him. The answer is gratitude for all that the Father has done for us through His Son, and all He is doing in us and through us by His Spirit. Our desire to please the Father is directly proportional to our gratitude for the Father, who He is, what He has done, and what He is doing in our lives.

God has blessed us with unique and distinct spiritual gifts and natural talents, but they must not be our focus. Instead, we must focus on the ministry to which our Father has called each of us and all of us, that is, to always do what pleases Him. The more we appreciate what the Father has done to make our adoption as His children possible, the more our desire to please Him will increase. This is our ministry to the Father. It is also our ministry to others, because every act of love expressed to another human being, is also an act of love expressed to God.

As a means to develop our ministry to please the Father in all that we think, say and do, I suggest reading, reciting and reflecting on the following Scripture verses, allowing an attitude of gratitude to well up in us until it flows out of us.

"Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his steadfast love endures forever."
(Psalm 106:1)

"The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God."
(Romans 8:16)

"I will be a Father to you and you will be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty." (2 Corinthians 6:18)

"Whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father." (Colossians 3:17)

"I will never leave you nor forsake you." (Hebrews 13:5)

"Every good thing bestowed and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation, or shifting shadow."
(James 1:17)

How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!" (1 John 3:1)